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SFUND RECORDS CTR
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DRAFT

January 22, 1998

Mr. Kevin Mayer
Remedial Project Manager
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Region 9 - Mail Code SFD73
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, California 94105

Dear Kevin:

Metropolitan's Concerns with Perchlorate in Colorado River Water

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (Metropolitan) recently detected perchlorate in its Colorado River water supply. Investigation has demonstrated that the perchlorate is entering the Colorado River from Lake Mead via the Las Vegas wash. Perchlorate-laden ground water from nearby industrial facilities is the source of perchlorate. To date, levels found have ranged from 5 to 9 parts per billion (ppb), well below the California Action Level of 18 ppb. SNWA, which also withdraws Colorado River Water from Lake Mead, has recently observed perchlorate levels up to 16 ug/l in their intake.

Although our water supplies are well below the perchlorate standard, we remain concerned because of the following reasons:

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1. Perchlorate detection at any level may induce a multi-plaintiff lawsuit.

Perchlorate, as well as solvents, has been used in recently filed multi-plaintiff lawsuits seeking compensation for health effects claimed to result from levels of these contaminants even though appropriate state and federal standards were being met (see Attachment No. 1). The potential of these suits is very real and has caused great concern among our member agencies and subagencies (see Attachment No. 2). These lawsuits could have a huge impact on water suppliers. For example, a recent, similar multi-plaintiff lawsuit against Pacific Gas and Electric was settled out of court for hundreds of millions of dollars.

2. Perchlorate detection will have to be reported in our Consumer Confidence Reports. Metropolitan, its member agencies, and its subagencies will have to report perchlorate detections in our annual Consumer Confidence Reports if perchlorate is found above the detection limit of 4 ppb. These reports will be distributed to our 16 million consumers. If we must report a perchlorate detection, it will undermine public confidence in our drinking water (see the excellent water quality we are currently able to report to our consumers in Attachment No. 3), and could also contribute to additional multi-plaintiff lawsuits.

3. Perchlorate occurrence will reduce our ability to make maximum use of groundwater resources. To date, 13 wells in Southern California have been

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identified as having perchlorate above 18 ppb, and most of these have been shut down. Treatment of these wells would be extremely expensive, involving technologies such as reverse osmosis. Blending with water that is free of perchlore would be viable if our surface water were free of perchlorate, which it is not. Also, contamination of groundwater basins is occurring as a result of using Colorado River water for recharge. The net result would be increased demands on our need for water from the Sacramento River Bay/Delta.

4. California has legislation pending that will require a primary drinking water standard. Senator Byron Sher has introduced legislation that will require a California Maximum Contaminant Level for perchlorate by July 1, 1999. This legislation was introduced as a result of the perception that the current Action Level is not adequately protective of public health. If the standard setting process resulted in a lowering of the perchlorate standard, Metropolitan could find itself violating a primary drinking water standard, which is anathema to this organization.

We have estimated that it will take a minimum of 3-5 years for the Colorado River to flush itself if the contamination source in Henderson, Nevada were eliminated immediately. It may take significantly longer. There are no economic treatment options which could be installed quickly to remove perchlorate. Our only

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viable option is to eliminate the contamination through source protection as soon as possible.

Given EPA's emphasis on source protection, we would hope you feel as strongly about this issue as we do. Metropolitan, our member agencies and our subagencies have become extremely concerned with this perchlorate contamination problem. We look forward to EPA's assistance in stopping the contamination as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Roy L. Wolfe, Ph.D.
Associate Director of Water Quality

MDB/RLW/ac

Attachments

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